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Philadelphia House of Refuge

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*JULY, 1890.*

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A  
CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY  
OF THE  
**PHILADELPHIA HOUSE OF REFUGE**

BY  
JOS. G. ROSENGARTEN, ESQ.,  
OF THE PHILADELPHIA BAR.

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## THE HOUSE OF REFUGE.

A RECENT investigation by a legislative commission has attracted public attention to the House of Refuge. This reformatory was established here over sixty years ago by a few leading public-spirited citizens, among them Bishop White, Chief Justice Tilghman, the Hon. John Sergeant, and other representative men of every pursuit, profession and creed. From that day to this it has been controlled by the contributors through a Board of Managers, in which the State is represented by three members, appointed by the Board of Judges, and the city by two members, appointed by the mayor. Towards the buildings private contributions, gifts and legacies have given over \$350,000, the State has given over \$100,000 and the city \$10,000. The annual expense of maintenance has been provided by the State and the city, for at the outset children were sent from all the counties of the State, while since the establishment of a similar reformatory near Pittsburg the State has been divided into two districts—the Eastern, including about two-thirds the population of the State, still sending children to Philadelphia, the rest of the State sending them to the Pittsburg house.

The city sends a large number of children, and finds abundant compensation for its appropriation in the good results of the work done by this reformatory. For many years the managers have anxiously sought for the means of removing their institution, with its 800 inmates, to the country, establishing them in cottage homes, and using the congregate system only for the new comers until their special fitness is ascertained, for the incorrigibles, and especially for those returned to the institution. Succeeding applications to the State for a small share of its large surplus

p. 50593

income had all measures of legislative luck, mostly bad, and when finally a bill passed both Houses providing for the purchase by the State of the larger part of the house, for the purpose of establishing there an intermediate reformatory for boys between 16 and 21, a class largely filling our prisons and jails, and quite out of place there, it was vetoed by the Governor.

Disheartened, but not dismayed, the managers again appealed to private generosity, and in response came the munificent gift of \$100,000 from William Massey, followed by \$105,000 from the late I. V. Williamson, \$35,000 from the late John Smith, and other gifts of families and individuals from \$5000 down, aggregating nearly \$350,000, with which a large tract of land in Delaware County was purchased, and where four buildings suited for the improved methods of reformatory work are being rapidly completed. It is proposed to house the boys in cottages holding each fifty inmates, with a house father and mother, and to have suitable administration buildings, work shops, schools, chapel and all the other necessary adjuncts on a scale sufficient to house 1000 inmates and the necessary staff of officers. The farm will supply capital training for a large number of boys, who will thus be fitted for life in the country, free from the temptations of city life. Useful trades can be thoroughly taught, so that every boy, besides the good elementary education that he now receives, will have a technical training that will help him on in life.

Towards this great establishment the State has contributed \$35,000, subject to a proviso that it shall have an option to buy the city property, and to credit that amount on the purchase price, which has been fixed at \$400,000—little more than the ground is worth.

A legislative commission was created at the last session, with large powers to examine the methods in force in penal, reformatory and charitable institutions receiving aid from the State, with a view to the establishment of a good system of supervising the application of State money,

of preventing the duplication and misuse of its appropriations, and of devising methods of account that should show the per capita cost of the inmates, and other financial points of interest. That commission spent many weeks in an investigation of the House of Refuge. Its methods have been laid before the public in daily newspaper reports, and the results have not been such as to increase the number of those who are likely to give time and labor to the care of these and kindred institutions. Managers who have given years of labor to the work, succeeding in many cases to the fathers and grandfathers who had taken part in the founding and building of these institutions, were subject to the investigation of men and women who for the first time in their lives visited such establishments, and thus, totally without preparation, found fault with existing methods, and proposed changes that were impracticable and puerile. Instead of the broad system of intelligent inquiry from those best able to give information, the opportunity was used to fill the public, through some of the newspapers, with sensational charges of the most outrageous kind. Challenged to prove them, days and nights were spent in examination of witnesses without establishing a single one of these grave offences, and even at the last, in an executive session, the chairman, who was both prosecutor and judge and jury, repeated the statement that he had evidence in his possession, but out of consideration for the character of the witnesses he would not call them. What sort of consideration he thought due to those who had been examined, to the managers and officers, and the ex-inmates and the inmates, he did not explain. Certain it is that no report made to the Legislature can carry with it the weight due to a fair and judicial investigation, and its conclusions and recommendations must lose all value from the methods adopted in pursuing the inquiry.

Beginning as a private effort to reform a class before neglected, the Philadelphia House of Refuge was the second institution of the kind in this country, New York preceding it

only a short time. For over sixty years it has steadily worked on, improving its methods and its discipline and its education just as fast and as far as could be done under the disadvantages incidental to a congregate system in a great city, grown up to and around and far beyond its walls. Now that private munificence has in a year or two provided a great sum of money, as much as has been given in all the earlier half century and more of its existence, and while it is still appealing to individuals, to State and city, for the means of completing its great plans, and for carrying on its work in accordance with the methods in force in the best reformatories in this country and abroad, its efforts are paralyzed by this sort of so-called legislative investigation, and the public are kept for weeks waiting for the proof of charges of the gravest kind, and although not one of them was sustained, public confidence receives a serious shock, and the discipline of the House of Refuge is threatened by the imprudent utterances of official and non-official persons and newspapers, giving the inmates to understand that no matter what the faults that brought them there, these volunteer sympathizers were ready to give them a safe deliverance, an easy life, and impunity for any license or violation of established rules they might choose to indulge in. Meantime the managers and officers are left to reconcile themselves as best they may to imputations on their character, to charges of sins of omission and commission, and to this sort of return from the representatives of the people for years of earnest labor in behalf of a class that especially need a guiding hand, a watchful eye and a careful discipline.

The figures that tell the extent of the work of the House of Refuge during its long and useful career show how greatly it has been needed, and the growth of population shows that it is still a necessary adjunct to our other institutions. Since its opening, in 1828, down to the close of 1889, the House of Refuge has received 18,384 children—13,729 boys and 4655 girls—and of these it is believed that



nearly 80 per cent. have been rescued from lives of crime and shame, and restored either to their own families, or where, as was too often the case, this was not to be desired, good homes were found for them, mostly in the country, where they were regularly visited by a representative of the institution, which thus continues its kindly care of its former inmates. Nor does it end here, for only lately a trade school has been opened for the benefit of boys who have left the house, so that when out of work they have the opportunity of learning a trade that will enable them to find employment and to be self-supporting, industrious and honest, thus rescuing them from the temptation to return to their old courses and to be once more a charge on the community. Charity of this kind is indeed twice blessed, for it benefits not only the immediate recipients of its training, but it does incalculable good in changing them from being an expense to the public into wage earners.

Readily acknowledging the objections to institutional life for young children, and the advantage of finding homes for those who by misfortune or something worse of their parents are in need of care, the children sent to the House of Refuge are of a class that could not with advantage to themselves or safety to others be sent into private families without a period of moral regeneration. Just as hospitals are necessary alike for the care of their inmates and the protection of the public, so the House of Refuge is an asylum for the reformation of children who need its discipline and training before they can be safely returned to their own homes or sent to others carefully selected for them. The evils necessarily incidental to congregate systems will be practically reduced to the minimum by the cottage homes at Glen Mills, while the advantage of classification can be there secured, and the open air life, the farm work, schools and work shops will all be just such as to give to the inmates the benefit of that amount of restraint necessary to effective discipline and training.

After all, what the House of Refuge wants is not a hostile investigation of its past, for that is soon to be a matter of history, but a sympathetic effort to secure the best methods that will put it ahead of other reformatories in point of results, just as it antedates all but one of those that are now in successful operation in this country. The present system of cottage homes is one of comparatively recent date. Introduced near Hamburg by Father Wichern rather as one of the conditions of the home founded by him on an old farm, with its scattered buildings, it has gradually been extended in both old and new reformatories until they are to-day in general use. The advantage of that personal supervision which comes from the management in the hands of private individuals, over the perfunctory attendance of state officials, is heightened in the House of Refuge by the fact that in its present Board there are those who represent the second and third generation of the men who first established the institution, and thus take an hereditary interest in its welfare.

Much attention has of late been given to the question of prison labor as a factor in the problem of keeping up wages. Apart from the very small proportion which its products bear to the general result of goods made for the market, it must be borne in mind that the House of Refuge is not a prison. Chief Justice Gibson said, in 1838, that it was not a prison but a school, and from that day to this the distinction has been carefully kept in mind in dealing with the inmates. If they are to lead good and honest lives and to become wage earners and producers, and not mere consumers and a charge on the taxpayers, they must be taught trades which, on their discharge, will yield them a living, and thus enable them to resist temptation. If this is borne in mind by those who lead the labor organizations, their members cannot fail to see that the advantage to the whole community is much greater than to the individual boy or girl, while the benefit to them is a relief to the taxpayer and to the wage earner.

In discussing and investigating methods of discipline in force in the House of Refuge, the examiners should be experts who have lived and worked in such institutions, and who know something of what is needed for the training of boys and girls. Even those who live in good homes can rarely show a larger percentage of those of whom a good account can be given than the number reclaimed by the House of Refuge. When the home influences that have surrounded them from their earliest years are borne in mind, it is only surprising that the few months spent in the House of Refuge, an average of twenty-one months for boys and twenty-eight months for girls, should effect such good results. The reason for it is found in the constant supervision exercised over them, the well-defined succession of employment and relaxation, the alternation of hours of work and play and school and sleep, the uniformly good food, the regular hours, the abundant time for sleeping, and incessant sanitary inspection. The medical reports show that the children gain in health and strength and weight; that the percentage of disease is very small, and of mortality far below the average out of doors, and all this in spite of the fact that the children sent to the House of Refuge in too many cases bear the burthen of hereditary disease and suffer for the sins of others rather than their own. Yet with all these difficulties to contend with, the managers of the House of Refuge show a population that tells better than any figures the advantages of a well-ordered life for those who, perhaps for the first time, within its walls learn to know what it is to have enough food, decent clothing, abundant facilities for cleanliness, regular hours and comfortable sleeping and living and dining and working and school and play rooms. As against these substantial gains it is hardly fair that the evidence of discharged employés, of amateur visitors and of inmates, should be allowed to outweigh the testimony of those who have given their lives to the work that has for over sixty years been done in and by the House of Refuge.

That the State should inspect and investigate the institutions toward which it contributes from its treasury is both right and proper, but this should be done by trained inspectors, permanently employed, upon a sound system. In this way the Legislature would gather just such information as it needs for its guidance. The State Board of Charities is created for this very purpose, and its annual reports contain the best summary of the facts and statistics, the suggestions and recommendations, that are needed to inform both the people and their representatives of the work of the State, local and other institutions. In harmony with the method in force since the foundation of Pennsylvania, much of the best work of this kind is done by private corporations, established by charitable men and women, and watched over by those who have given money and time and thought to their maintenance. The House of Refuge is an example of over sixty years of just such volunteer charity, and it has a record for usefulness and of results that entitle it to the confidence and support alike of the public and of private benefactors. The continuance of both is the only reward that those entrusted with the responsibility of its management have ever asked.





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